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SALONS OLD AND NEW

BY MURIEL HARRIS

IT is often difficult to decide whether any given social phenomenon is a reaction or a revival. In Italy the new learning was in one sense a revival, but in another it was a reaction against the dull and stereotyped doctrine of force and destruction. The French salon owed much to the new philosophers, the new litterateurs, but on the other hand, it was definitely a protest against the heavy pomp and egotism of Louis Quatorze. And since that overwhelming monarch lasted a very long time and since Mme. de Maintenon underlined all that was heaviest and dullest at the then French court, a reaction of a very marked kind was almost inevitable. The French salon of the eighteenth century therefore seems to have been a reaction against two conditions—against pomposity and dulness and heaviness generally and against the monopoly by men of any sort of intellectual society and the relegation of women to backstairs “amours” and court intrigue. Incidentally too, it intensified a tradition, which had already held in France and which holds to this day more than in any other country—namely that youth and beauty were not the only qualities desirable in women. During the salon period, women not only might have minds, but minds took the place in quite a number of cases of anything in the shape of good looks. And not even the “*femme savante*” of the blue-stocking conception has ever succeeded since in preventing the Frenchman from enjoying brains in a woman.

There were other conditions which crystallized the genius of the moment into the well-marked social phenomenon which every woman of culture has ever since desired to emulate. There was a relatively small, aristocratic society of great wealth and with abundance of house-room. There was a remarkable number of literary, philosophical and scientific men, many of whom, according to the usage of the day, were ready for patrons.

At the same moment there was a group of women of well-marked character, versed in all the social usages, vying with each other in chasing lions, but at the same time supporting each other in the similarity of their conceptions. Further—and this is not the least important factor in a later survey of the eighteenth century salons—there was a number of admirable writers of memoirs and records of the brilliant society of the day. It is often forgotten how greatly a Johnson depends upon a Boswell for his reputation, a Chateaubriand upon a Saint-Beuve. Finally—and this is perhaps the greatest paradox of all, the eminent French hostesses who entertained Corneille, and Montaigne and Voltaire and Horace Walpole and La Rochefoucaud were not women of education at all in the modern sense. Conversing with the greatest minds of the century, they did this totally devoid, in the majority of cases, of even the rudiments of what we now call education. The Maréchale de Luxembourg, whose salon was the most exclusive perhaps of many, who might conceivably have had opportunity for a modicum of book education, was by no means profoundly instructed. And yet La Rochefoucaud found in Madame de la Fayette, D'Alembert in Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse, Chateaubriand in Madame de Récamier the understanding and inspiration needed by every genius, while Voltaire actually complained of the erudition of Madame du Châtelet. Where the Frenchwoman excels and always has excelled is in her instinctive knowledge of men, her worldly wisdom. "*Femme du monde*" is no idle phrase. And the Frenchman has always reciprocated this knowledge with a profound attachment, very different from the fear of Horace Walpole that his friendship with so old a woman as Madame de Deffand might make him an object of ridicule. It is probably this innate knowledge of the world, as instanced in a little French girl who, on being asked why she thought Napoleon loved Marie Louise better than Josephine, answered "*parce qu'elle lui donna un fils*," which made of the French salon the clear-cut, social phenomenon that it was. At least it has never been repeated in other countries with quite such force and quite such brilliancy.

It was characteristic that the English salon should follow the French salon and that, generally speaking, it should take

rather a different form. In some directions the English coffee house corresponded most accurately to the French salon. On the other hand, there was always the Swan of Lichfield, Miss Seward, whose Bath Easton parties are commemorated to this day. The Holland House circle stands out as perhaps the most typical of the English salons and here the conditions which made the French salon so successful were in a sense duplicated. To many of the distinguished foreigners who thronged Holland House, Lord Holland himself, with his sympathy, learning and understanding, was the attraction. But Lady Holland played very ably the rôle of mistress of a salon which included as constant visitors such guests as Sheridan, Sir Philip Francis—supposed to have been the author of the Letters of Junius—Byron, Lord Brougham, Washington Irving, Tallyrand, Metternich and a host of others. A woman who could tell Macaulay to talk about something else as he was getting dull, who could order Sydney Smith to ring the bell and take good-humoredly his retort, "Oh yes, and shall I sweep the room?," and could do this with perfect equanimity, was a woman of the calibre worthy of the salon. But Lady Holland's salon was essentially the product of an aristocrat, bored with the inanity of her peers and finding in clever juxtaposition of clever men of all sorts the piquancy which became the breath of life to her. Here it resembled the French salons, except that it had no peers. On the other hand it practically ignored the feminine side of society and had nothing at all in common with the blue-stockings.

Actually the English salon was quite often not a salon at all. Lady Dorothy Nevill, for instance, gave lunches which approximated the salon far more than did entertainments seeking to emulate them. She made a point of being at home every Sunday and she made a point of good food. Naturally of quite remarkable tolerance and un-selfconsciousness, she invited all and sundry, and of recent London hostesses, she was by far the most remarkable. Almost up to the day of her death, but a short time ago, this little old lady with a tiny face and a large red wig, with an autocratic manner and an eighteenth-century mode of pronouncing "cucumber" and "coffee" and "china," entertained every one of note who passed through London. Her friendship with

Edmund Gosse, with Frederic Harrison, is writ large in her own Memoirs, but she was also keenly interested in young writers, poets, statesmen, and an invitation to lunch at Charles Street was to receive a patent of distinction. Her wit was too personal to transmit, but on one occasion she was met at a picture-show by a friend, who asked her why her hair was black that day. "I'm in mourning," she said drily.

In general in England the spirit of the salon lives now in a number of smaller groups of people, drawn together on a common basis and eliminating the idea of any particularly central figure—unless that central figure be a particular lion. Henry James, for instance, practically carried the salon spirit about with him, though, contrary to the French custom, he was the centre of a group of women. From his home in Chelsea, he visited his friends, where congregated a little crowd of adorers, including the Misses Palgrave, daughters of the compiler of the *Golden Treasury*, "the gentle sisters" as he used to call them, the Trevelyan, great-nephews of Macaulay and well known historians and biographers, the Arnolds, Lady Ritchie, Thackeray's daughter, the Tennysons and a number of others.

In Chelsea too, there are to-day a number of well-known English families of long literary tradition, whose weekly evenings have a good deal in common with the thought of the salon, if without its brilliant surroundings. A real salon used to be that of Felix Moscheles, whose beautiful London garden allowed them also to be held during the early summer. Through Mrs. Moscheles' salon used to pass practically all the musicians and actors of the day, and Ellen Terry, with her gay, charming, child-like character, was a frequent visitor there. Mrs. J. R. Green's Sundays formed another literary centre, and the wife of the distinguished historian mixed in with Irish patriots young people and old, treating them with a lack of ceremony which some of them found embarrassing, as instance the occasion of a large dinner party at her house. Instead of sitting down to dinner, she drew on her gloves, and said she was sorry to leave her guests to themselves but she wanted to dine with Lord Haldane and had forgotten about it until that minute. But the salon as of old

really exists no more in London, and it is only in these fragmentary groups that you find any of its spirit left.

What then is the future of the salon—if any? Is it quite impossible to recapture the impulse which combined at once so many factors to form a brilliant society of intellect? There were perhaps never so many ideas afloat as is the case to-day. Is there to be no centralizing genius which shall gather them once again into an articulate and living society? In one sense, such companies of wit and talent and thought are almost essential to the well-being of the genius, whoever he is. Loneliness, lack of understanding, are not the least of the difficulties with which the genius of to-day has to cope. It was no doubt partly sheer loneliness on the part of the man ahead of his time, which made the success of the French salons, in that they provided him at once with admiration and with companions who could speak his language. In France and England the day of the salon seems to be definitely over. Conditions in the two old countries are changing fast. Wealth for one thing has changed hands; the stringencies of the war have left people dispirited; there is little light-heartedness, little of the impulse necessary to make a hobby of what may seem the unessential. Literature and art have received a blow from which they are not yet likely to recover and nationalism and all the other “isms” have taken their place. Also a certain naïveté, a certain ability to enjoy frankly and without reserve belong perhaps to an earlier age. Culture is widely enough spread for it to cease to be remarkable in the old sense. A Bath tea-party has a bygone suggestion about it to-day, no matter how distinguished its guests. There is none of the sharp division between the aristocrat and the man of letters which made their discovery of each other so unusually thrilling. Where then do the conditions exist, which again might produce the salons of the eighteenth century France?

It is possible that the next salons may exist in America. Here great wealth is concentrated, making possible the fundamental question of hospitality. Here the tendency to form exclusive and aristocratic communities is, if anything, on the up-grade. Here again culture is sought, very much as it was sought in the eighteenth century. In no European country, for instance, could

be found such lecture audiences as exist now in the United States. In no other country at the present time is the distinguished visitor such a factor. In no other country do hostesses go to such pains concerning the personal element. In France and England, you may take it or leave it, according as you like society or not. Here, you are specially catered for, and there is genuine appreciation, even while it is more indiscriminating than in Europe, of talent of every kind. There are plenty of American traditions of the salon in colonial days. Elizabeth Graeme of Philadelphia, the Republican drawing-rooms, the Robert Morris', Mrs. Meredith, all of these show a salon spirit which is very much more than an echo from an older world. And if at the end of the eighteenth century the voyage to the United States was by no means a seven days' wonder and distinguished foreigners came there from all parts of the world, how much are the difficulties of travel decreased to-day and how greatly is America—sometimes for reasons which will not bear investigation—become the magnet, attracting learning and culture from all the old countries? In Paris, American hostesses are well-known and have a place of their own, and as America becomes more self-sufficing, less dependent on the stimulus of outside thought, who shall not say that her quick spirit, her enthusiasm, her capacity for enjoyment of things worn out in the old world, shall not make her the lineal descendant of the brilliant eighteenth and nineteenth century company which to this day stirs our imagination and our desire?

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